

Children's books: read more, more often

World Book Day coincided this year with the release of two surveys, one showing that fewer than half the parents in the UK read to their children daily, and another revealing that household spending on digital entertainment had for the first time surpassed that on the printed word. These figures might seem pretty optimistic to anyone who cares about literacy. But then there is the news that Northampton county council, bleeding to death from cuts in government funding, is to close 21 libraries. That is not just a retreat from any ambition of universal provision but a panicked rout.

The collapse of public libraries turns reading into a matter of class distinction. Those children whose parents read to them will enjoy, in every sense, huge advantages over those who do not. Reading books is not just a matter of the technical skill of turning marks on paper into words in the mind. Schools can and do teach that, albeit with varying success. But that skill really is only the beginning.

True readers play with words, just as words play with them. Reading to small children is at first purely joyful and then, when the child has discovered a favourite story, increasingly exasperating as the same words must be repeated like a charm, but it is never wasted. Familiarity with language and the ability to recognise, follow and ultimately to build and sustain complex arguments are skills that enrich our apprehension of the world and help us to master it. This is what reading gives children.

The best children's books provide a scaffolding for the growing soul. They show us bravery and wonder, and dangers overcome. To read them out loud makes a bridge between childhood and adulthood, so that the parent reading can recover for a moment the sight of the world through a child's unfilmed eyes. It may be the most sublime form of play that has ever been invented.